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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000184

SIPDIS
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SUBJECT: FEBRUARY 4 GENERAL "WORK STOPPAGE" GATHERS STEAM

REF: ANKARA 174

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The looming February 4 nationwide "work stoppage" by six major labor confederations is garnering extensive media coverage but few reliable predictions on the extent of participation. Turk-Is President Kumlu has carefully emphasized that what they will launch should not be termed a "general strike," because that would be illegal. Turk-Is said most of its workers will "consider themselves on leave" February 4. The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has indicated that its employees will also not work February 4 to show its support for the protesting TEKEL workers. The government so far has refrained from issuing any warnings or threats to the unions. However, Turkish Airlines has stated that the employment contracts of those workers who participate in the strike may be cancelled. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) The actual extent of the one-day general strike February 4 called by the Turk-Is Labor Confederation (REFTEL) remains impossible to predict. But the inclusion of five other labor union confederations of public and private workers -- DISK, Hak-Is, Memur-Sen, Kamu-Sen and KESK - suggests the impact may be significant. All have announced they will participate between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Turk-Is President Mustafa Kumlu has carefully emphasized that what they will launch should not be termed a "general strike" (as it is illegal) but instead a "one day work stoppage." Another confederation, the Independent Public Employees Unions Confederation (BASK), has announced that it will provide outside support to the six confederations and will also participate in the work stoppage. Meanwhile, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has indicated that its party employees will also not work February 4 to show its support to the TEKEL workers.

3. (U) Mustafa Turkel, President of the Food Workers Union (Tek-GidaIs) with whom the TEKEL workers are affiliated, insisted that the work stoppage would take place "with zero failure" in all establishments where the union is organized. He estimated that one million workers would participate. Kamu-Sen President Bircan Akyildiz said the strike should be seen as a serious warning to the political administration. He accused the government of trying to put the blame for unemployment on the shoulders of the TEKEL workers. He declared that if the GOT continues to be indifferent, the protests will continue.

4. (SBU) Turk-Is Labor Confederation Press official Sevkutan

Nevsuhan told us that workers affiliated with unions attached to Turk-Is will "consider themselves on leave" February 4. She declined to predict the number of participants, but emphasized that all workers of the six labor confederations are involved. Meanwhile, Hak-Is labor confederation is somewhat more equivocal. Although known to be close to the government, Hak-Is has indicated that due to its "responsibilities and principles as a labor confederation," it has joined the other confederations in this protest. Hak-Is International Relations Officer Osman Yildiz informed us that Hak-Is will issue a statement expressing its optimism that a solution will be found prior to the beginning of the strike. Still, the confederation has issued circulars to its affiliated unions instructing them to prepare for the work stoppage.

15. (SBU) An Anatolia News Agency correspondent who follows labor issues, Goksel Yildirim, told us that most workers will simply not show up for work, but that some would gather in front of Turk-Is headquarters to demonstrate their support for the TEKEL workers. He said workers affiliated with DISK will gather in two places in Istanbul at 11 a.m., and would march to Sarachane Park to issue a press statement. He noted that at this point it is difficult to estimate the scope of participation.

16. (U) The first warning to the workers came from the Turkish Airlines (THY) administration. Turkey Civil Aviation Workers Union (Hava-Is) issued a circular to its members instructing them to participate in the strike tomorrow. However, THY sent e-mails and posted announcements stating that while expressing demands is the most natural right of workers, according to the current legislation, what they would do on February 4 would be illegal. THY noted that the employment contracts of those who participate in the work stoppage may be cancelled.

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17. (SBU) Meanwhile, an official with the Turkish Employers Unions Confederation (TISK) told us, predictably, that TISK does not approve of the work stoppage. He said that national economy will suffer, and there would be production losses. He added that the employers are not a party to this dispute, and believe that such frictions pull labor relations into a deadlock. He said TISK urges the parties to act with common sense and hopes dialogue will prevail.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The TEKEL dispute continues to escalate. We sense a hardening of positions on all sides. It seems likely that this one-day work stoppage will prompt investigations into individual cases, as happened after the November 25 general strike. Opposition parties will certainly exploit the situation. The government finds itself in an unfamiliar position - pitted against workers - and may opt to navigate more carefully in subsequent privatization efforts.